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Recommended Citation

Anagiotos, Christos (2014). "Is National Identity Learned? The Case of Turkish-Cypriot Young Adults in Cyprus," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2014/papers/6>

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Is National Identity Learned?

The Case of Turkish-Cypriot Young Adults in Cyprus

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Keywords: National identity, learning identity, Cyprus, Turkish-Cypriot, young adults

Abstract: Greek-Cypriots and Turkish-Cypriots lived apart from 1974 until 2003 as a result of nationalist conflict on the island. This phenomenological study aims to describe how Turkish-Cypriot young adults (born after 1974) learn their national identity by examining how their lived experiences have influenced this learning.

Introduction

Cyprus is an island nation in the eastern part of the Mediterranean Sea, founded in 1960 (after 82 years of British colonization) and a member of the European Union (EU) since 2004. Cyprus occupies an area of 9,250 square kilometers or 3,500 square miles and has a population of about a million. Cyprus is a divided country as a result of nationalist conflict. Greek-Cypriots and Turkish-Cypriots, the two major communities on the island, experienced bi-communal violent conflict during the 1960s and 1970s and have lived apart from 1974 until 2003.

A number of national self-identifications can be found in the two communities on the island. These are Cypriot, Turkish-Cypriot, Greek-Cypriot, Greek and Turkish. Thus national identity issues on the island are, to say the least, complicated, particularly in regards to the generation that did not experience the violent events between the two communities nor met people from the other community until later in their lives. These are people born between 1975 and 1988.

In this study I examined how young adults from the Turkish-Cypriot community, who were born between 1975 and 1988, learn and make sense of their national identity. What are the lived experiences and events in their lives that lead them to form their national identity? Although two main communities exist in Cyprus, the Greek-Cypriot and the Turkish-Cypriot, this study examined the national identity of young adults only from the Turkish-Cypriot community. In this paper I present some preliminary findings from the study. A similar study with the respective Greek-Cypriot population was conducted and presented at the Adult Education Research Conference (AERC) in 2013. The paper for that presentation can be found in the AERC 2013 proceedings (see Anagiotos & Schied, 2013)

Historical Background

In Cyprus, issues of nationalist conflict resulted in the separation of the two major communities on the island, the Greek-Cypriot community (around 800,000 population) and the Turkish-Cypriot (around 180,000 population) (Anastasiou, 2008). Difference in national identity was one reason that led to bi-communal violent conflict during 1960s (1963, 1964 and 1967) and indirectly resulted to the division of the island in 1974 when Turkey invaded Cyprus. The occupied north part of Cyprus, making up 37.4 percent of the island, is considered by the international community, the United Nations (UN) and the EU as occupied (by Turkey) territory of the Republic of Cyprus (Mallinson, 2005).

In 1974, Turkish-Cypriots were forced to move to the north part of the island occupied by Turkey and in 1983 they formed the Turkish Republic of North Cyprus (TRNC) that is politically recognized only by Turkey (the rest of the international community considers it an illegal state under the international law). In 1974 the Greek-Cypriots were also forced to move to the south part of the country governed by the Republic of Cyprus. Until 2003 Turkish-Cypriots were not allowed to visit the south part of the island and Greek-Cypriots were not allowed to visit the north part of the island. The island was and is still divided by the “dead zone”, “green line” or “buffer zone” (the artificial border that divides the two areas). Consequently the two communities were isolated from 1974 until 2003 (Papadakis, Peristianis & Welz, 2006). After 2003 people from the two communities were allowed to cross the “dead line” and visit the “other side”.

Throughout the recent history of the island (after its independence in 1960), despite extended periods of previous peaceful coexistence, these two major ethnic groups in Cyprus have “failed to accommodate their linguistic, religious and other differences in a civic multicultural state of its own right” (Yiangou, 2002, p. 262). Without a doubt, “Hellenic and Turkish cultural foundations of the two communities have been cultivated over many centuries and are deeply rooted” (Calotychos, 1998, p. 14). Nevertheless, external pressures from Greece, Turkey and England played a catalytic role in creating distinct identities between the two groups, highlighting their differences and creating ethnic tension. Since the events of 1974, Cyprus remains separated and current negotiations for a just, democratic and viable solution remain at a stand-still (Ker-Lindsay, 2011). Cyprus’ relationship with Greece and Turkey, and the prospective acceptance of Turkey to the EU, remains an important issue for the future of Cyprus. Reunification prospects could be influenced by nationalistic sentiments of Cypriot people on both sides, which would affect stability and security in the case of a possible solution (Yiangou, 2002).

Theoretical Framework and Method

In this study I used phenomenology as a theoretical framework and as a method. Phenomenology focuses on examining the human consciousness and the human lived experiences “how [individuals] perceive it, describe it, judge it, remember it, make sense of it, and talk about it with others” (Patton, 2002, p. 104) and uses descriptive techniques to explain human experiences and the way individuals and groups make sense of such experiences. The lived experiences of the participants are the key elements of phenomenology that distinguish it from other theoretical frameworks (Van Manen, 1997).

Phenomenological design enabled me to draw a rich and detailed picture of the phenomenon of construction of national identity as described by the participants and explore details in the participants’ experiences to gain a deeper understanding. Specifically, I used the empirical phenomenological approach that examines participants’ “experiences in order to obtain comprehensive descriptions that provide the basis for a reflective structural analysis that portrays the essence of the experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 13).

In short, phenomenology as a research methodology seeks to find the meanings that people give to their lived experience and investigates their process of interpretation. The legitimacy of phenomenological methodology lies in its qualitative nature and in-depth understandings of human experiences through the processes to find out essences of the phenomenon.

Research Questions

Three were the major research questions for this study: 1) How do Turkish-Cypriot young adults (born between 1975 and 1988) make sense of their national identity? 2) What are the experiences that influence the learning of the national identity of Turkish-Cypriot young adults? 3) How do these experiences contribute to the construction/learning of their national identity?

Participants

I interviewed a total of 11 residents of Cyprus, born between 1975 and 1988, who spent the first 18 years of their life on the island, speak Turkish and are Moslem. For the purposes of this paper I will call them Turkish-Cypriots to distinguish them from the majority group of Greek-Cypriots (who speak Greek and are Orthodox-Christians). All participants were born and grew up in an all Turkish-Cypriot environment without direct contact with the Greek-Cypriot community at least until the age of 18 and they went to Turkish-Cypriot public schools. They did not experience the violence between the two communities that took place between 1963 and 1974. Segregated from the Turkish-Cypriot community, their experience with Turkish-Cypriots was limited to the stories told by their parents and grandparents, and the Turkish-oriented history education that they received during their elementary, middle school and high school years.

Data Collection

The major sources of data are interviews conducted with each participant individually. I interviewed a total of 11 people. The interviews were semi-structured; they were recorded and they transcribed. Some of the interviews were conducted face-to-face and some through the Internet using Skype (an online video conferencing software) when participants were not able to meet in person. The duration of the interviews ranged from 46 minutes to 2 hours and 14 minutes, with most of them averaging an hour and 15 minutes long. Interviews conducted through Skype employed webcams in order to establish visual contact between the interviewee and the interviewer.

Findings

It is rather well known that the notion of 'Turkish community of Cyprus' is not a uniform collective identity anymore (Vural & Rustemli, 2006) with some members of this community identifying as Turkish-Cypriots and some others as Cypriots. It is rather remarkable that in a population of 200,000 people, with very homogeneous distinct culture, there are two very strong and in some cases competing identities. For this study I interviewed young adults from both groups, those that self-identify as Turkish-Cypriot and those that self-identify as Cypriot. As I show below national identity for these young adults was learned through certain lived experiences and in some cases through reflecting on these lived experiences. Below I discuss some of my findings related to these lived experiences and their connection to the learned national identity.

Learning National Identity through Education

All participants mentioned that while in school they self-identified as Turkish-Cypriots, with the Turkish part of their identity being reinforced by the environment in school. This is in agreement with the findings of many researchers that examined national identity in Turkish-Cypriot student populations and the Turkish-Cypriot educational system in general (i.e. Bryant,

2004, 2010; Vural & Özuyanik, 2008). Even participants that now self-identified as Cypriot pointed out that during their school years they identified as Turkish-Cypriots and specified that at the time they felt more Turkish than Cypriot. It was later in their lives that their national self-identification changed.

National celebrations at school, history textbooks and teachers' perspectives about their national identity were identified as the biggest influences of national identity construction during their school years. For some participants the Turkish-oriented history books facilitated the learning of the Turkish part of their identity along with the learning of history that described Turkish-Cypriots as ancestors of the Turks that came from "Anatolia", the same people that inhabited parts of the mainland Turkey.

Interestingly, for some of the participants, nationalist education and history books reinforced the Cypriot part of their identity. As one of the participants mentioned when she talked about the sections of the book that presented the cruel events of the 1960s and the pictures of dead Turkish-Cypriots as a result of the conflict, "I didn't want to take the book with me at home because I was afraid of that people. I was a child [9-10 years old] and I didn't want to study history and I didn't want to identify as Turkish". As she mentioned it was a kind of reaction to the cruelty in the books as well as the very nationalistic views that were promoted in the books.

Many participants mentioned visits to the Museum of National Struggle with their teachers as memorable experiences. The museum presents mostly pictures of Turkish-Cypriots being killed by Greek-Cypriots during the bi-communal conflict of the 1960s. Participants recalled feelings of hate and frustration when they visited the museum as students. For some, the visit to the museum at the time meant reinforcement of the Turkish part of their identity but others described it as just a horrifying experience that did not influence their self-identification, at least not consciously.

Most of the participants that now self-identify as Cypriot, reported that as youth and particularly during their school years (with all the experiences described above) they identified as Turkish-Cypriots and specified that at the time they felt more Turkish than Cypriot. All of them pointed out the nationalist Turkish-oriented education that they received during their school years with most of them now criticizing it and describing it as unnecessarily nationalistic.

Self-Identification when meeting foreigners:

Many of the participants, even those that identified as Cypriot, mentioned that they often felt they needed to clarify their identity when traveling abroad. As one of the participants said, "I usually say I come from Cyprus but most of the time when I say this, people assume I'm Greek-Cypriot and I don't like it because they don't know we [the Turkish-Cypriot] even exist... but I don't want to say I'm Turkish-Cypriot either, because I prefer Cypriot... It was confusing the first few times that it happened but now I say that I'm Cypriot and I live in the north side of Cyprus."

Another participant, reflecting on her experience abroad when meeting people that do not know much about Cyprus, said, "I say Cypriot probably because of the reaction I get when I say Turkish-Cypriot. People say, 'so you are Turkish' and I say 'no I'm Cypriot'... everybody thinks that if you are Cypriot and you live in the north you are Turkish, which is not right. We are not Turkish and we are not Greek! We are Cypriot that speak Turkish." Many of them described such experiences as learning experiences; in the process of explaining their national self-identification to other people they come to clarify their beliefs about their own national identity.

Many of the participants emphasized that they never do not identify as Turkish because to say so would imply that they are Turkish immigrants from Turkey (settlers) who moved to Cyprus after 1974, a group that Turkish-Cypriots do not want to identify with. Turkish immigrant workers are usually from lower socioeconomic status and some of them are involved in criminal activities, creating xenophobic reactions against them by the Turkish-Cypriot community and thus avoiding identifying the same as them (Akcali, 2011).

Meeting people from the Greek-Cypriot community

The participants that reported changes in their self-identification during their life, usually from identifying as Turkish-Cypriot to identifying as Cypriot, attributed a big part of this change to meeting people from the Greek-Cypriot community. For many it was a shocking and eye opening experience, while others seemed to be more prepared to meet people from the other community. All experienced meeting people from the other community as rather pleasant, but for many, issues of mistrust towards the other community remained even after such meetings.

For some of the participants meeting people from the other community acted as a reason for reflection about their self-identification. For the Turkish-Cypriot community the existence of Greek-Cypriots and the cruel events of the 1960s was a big part of how they understood their national identity. So for young Turkish-Cypriots meeting Greek-Cypriots who seemed rather normal and well behaved called into question the feelings of fear and hate that was promoted in the Turkish-Cypriot community and influences their learned national identity.

Conclusion

Learning of national identity is a complicated phenomenon. Particularly in areas of conflict, like Cyprus, it is important to understand how newer generations construct their national identity. In this study I examined the construction of national identity as a learning process. The findings from my study shed some light on the phenomenon of the existence of multiple identities in Cyprus, which for so long has been the basis of violent and non-violent conflict between and within the two communities. My analysis shows that learning of national identity is a socially and culturally constructed phenomenon and we need to examine it as such if we are to understand it. From the analysis it is evident that the participants (Turkish-Cypriot young adults, born after 1974 and uninvolved in the violent conflict between the two communities) negotiate, rethink and sometimes refine the national identity that was promoted to them by the school, the and their community. A number of experiences played important role in their learning and making sense of their national identity. Our argument is that since our participants and their generation did not experience the conflict they are more likely to find similarities with the Greek-Cypriots and live peacefully on the island. In general, and always in reference to the participants of this study, we saw a movement towards Cypriotism (Cypriot identity) as an attempt of this generation to live in harmony on the island with the other community.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to the Onassis Foundation for the financial support for my Ph.D. studies.

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